

ON THE  
**SUPPRESSION OF MENDICANCY**

IN THE  
**METROPOLIS.**

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**SPEECH**

OF  
**JOHN FREDERICK STANFORD, Esq., M.A., F.R.S.,**

(OF THE HONOURABLE SOCIETY OF LINCOLN'S-INN, BARRISTER AT LAW).

DELIVERED AT THE ST. MARY-LE-BONE VESTRY, ON SATURDAY, THE  
9TH OF OCTOBER, 1847.

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[Printed and circulated with a view to rouse the attention of the Public to the urgent necessity for  
suppressing Mendicancy in the Metropolis and in the large towns of England.]

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"How much better, then, for the humane to make the Church their almoner. By no method can the benevolent intentions of the charitable be more certainly attained, since no body of men is so well acquainted with the deserving poor as the parochial Clergy: by making them their almoners, the double good is effected of administering judicious relief, sound charity, and strengthening, at the same time, the cause of religion."—*Extract from Speech.*

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LONDON:  
JOHN PETHERAM, 94, HIGH HOLBORN.

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MDCCCXLVII.

To the Members of the Vestry of St. Marylebone, in recognition of their courtesy and attention, during a long and certainly not very entertaining Speech; and of the very handsome manner in which they expressed their readiness to co-operate in effecting the object I would accomplish—viz., “the Suppression of Mendicancy in the Metropolis,” I beg, with every feeling of respect, to dedicate these few pages.

October 12, 1847.

1847E  
St 24

## SPEECH, &c.

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SIR,

I THINK it unnecessary to offer any apology for bringing this subject under the consideration of the Board; for I may, without any exaggeration, assert that its importance to the community can with difficulty be overrated.

It is likewise a subject of which you are the properly constituted judges; since it deeply affects the interests of the industrious Poor of *your* Parish, as indeed it does of every Parish in the Metropolis; and, when considered *generally*, every Parish in the United Kingdom. It is, however, the partial and more limited consideration of the subject to which I am about to direct your attention as affecting the *Metropolis alone*; and I am induced to believe that its consideration here, may lead to beneficial results, by rousing the attention of the other Parochial Authorities of the Metropolis, and probably of the Government and Legislature, of whose notice it is far from being undeserving; and thus become the first step to check and to diminish, if not wholly to remove, an evil which is rapidly increasing, to the great corruption and demoralization of the poorer classes in this great capital.

And, Sir, I should not be sorry that this Board took the initiative in the matter; for none can charge you with a disposition to stay the hand of charity, with being actuated by motives of a harsh economy, or, indeed, with any feelings hostile to the Poor.

The admirable manner in which the RELIEF OF THE POOR in this Parish is administered, both in the house and out of the house, to upwards of 8,000 persons—erring, if at all, on the side of liberality—as I, an impartial eye witness, can bear testimony to, your anxiety to promote the welfare of the industrious Poor, by the erec-

tion of Baths and Wash Houses, and in effecting various sanitary improvements in and about their dwellings, will effectually guard you from such imputations.

But, Sir, there is too much practical knowledge among the members of this Vestry, to permit of their confounding the well-disposed and deserving Poor, with that degraded and despicable class of vicious and abandoned wretches who prey upon the feelings of the benevolent, and live upon the credulity of the charitably disposed.

I feel, therefore, confident that, while I am addressing men well affected to the Poor, I am, at the same time, appealing to those who will not be disposed to tolerate the maintenance of a system of IMPOSTURE and DECEIT in the guise of poverty.

If therefore, Sir, on this occasion, I am led, by the deep importance of the subject submitted for your consideration, to address you at greater length than I have ever yet ventured to do, I request of you to bear in mind the magnitude of the evil, and the impossibility of adequately representing it in a few words; and I feel satisfied you will be induced to extend that courtesy and indulgence which, I am happy to say, I have always experienced, *both individually and collectively, since I came among you.*

In the first place then, Sir, let me describe, though briefly, the class of persons I would root out, and the infamous trade I would suppress.

It is the numerous body of hardened and incorrigible street-beggars, the army of trading, sturdy mendicants, male and female, old and young, who infest the Metropolis and its environs, who assume, and successfully assume, every possible guise of poverty, misfortune, and disease, which craft and cunning can devise, and practised deceit can counterfeit.

Among the most hardened and abandoned, I rank the counterfeits of the severe afflictions of blindness, deafness, dumbness, loss of limbs, lameness, and natural infirmities; of paralysis, epilepsy, fits, jaundice, and consumption. When reading the reports gleaned from the most unquestionable evidence of Clergymen, Lawyers,

Medical Men, Police Commissioners, Relieving Officers, and Private Gentlemen, I could imagine myself reading a chapter from "Gil Blas," or of Fielding's humorous invention, rather than grave realities. I find it stated, in the Minutes of Evidence, taken before the Committee of the House of Commons, to enquire into the state of Mendicancy and Vagrancy in the Metropolis and its neighbourhood (July 11, 1815, p. 104), that, in Goodman's-yard, there are six beggars who affect blindness; a man of the name of Buller walks led by a dog, and hitting the curb-stone as he goes with a stick, affecting blindness; but can see so well that in the evenings he writes letters for his brother-beggars.

The beadle of St. George's was about to take up an impostor, with his leg in a wooden frame; but, on laying hold of him, he threw away his wooden frame, and scampered off with a better pair of legs than the beadle. He afterwards saw him with his arm tied up in a sling. (p. 77.)

Samuel Roberts, watch-house keeper of St. Giles's and St. George's, Bloomsbury, says (p. 132)—"I have seen, at the end of Compton-street, many beggars come out of the houses with a leg or arm tied up, and so on. They have had four or five glasses of gin before they started: they meet again in the evening, and cook their provisions, sometimes a turkey with sausages round it, which they call *an alderman hung in chains*."

One John Collins, in the neighbourhood of Lincoln's-inn-fields, known by the name of the *soap-eater*, is a great impostor and throws himself into fits.

In the Twenty-ninth Report of the Mendicancy Society (the last, at p. 36), is a statement of the deception practised by Sara Smith, affecting to be *deaf and dumb*, presenting a card, with numerous names of respectability, to vouch for the truth of her statement. But when taken up by the officers of the Society, she gave ample proof by a volley of abuse, which she poured on the officers, of the falsehood of her pretended affliction.

Sir, it would be endless to enumerate the varied modes of simulating disease, from the last stage of consumption, upon which the

patient lives for years in affluence, to the accomplished performer of convulsions and epileptic fits. I have witnessed these cases within my own experience. But to pass on to the description of the larger class of beggars—starving beggars, who write on the flag-stones “I am starving;” partially naked beggars, shivering with cold, man and wife and small-family-beggars, women with twins, decayed tradesmen, with shabby genteel garb, weavers out of work, ballad-singers, match and flower girls, and venders of all kinds of valueless articles. It would be trespassing on your time to attempt any detailed description of the artifices of this numerous band, the majority of whom are women, who are declared to be the greater impostors of the two, the most profligate, and the most abandoned. Were it necessary I could furnish, from my own experience, many examples of the ingenuity by which I have been induced to furnish relief.

One case just occurs to my recollection, which happened about two years since, and which is not unlike the tale in the “Arabian Nights.” An old man, I had for some time allowed a trifle a week to, came to me in great anguish of mind, in consequence of the death of his aged partner, requesting some little help to have her obsequies more decently performed: he could not bear to think of committing her remains to the parish coffin, which he described as being so ill joined that you might put your two fingers in. Feeling pleased with the good feeling evinced, I gave him something, and he went on his way rejoicing. Some few weeks afterwards, a female came for his weekly allowance, alleging his inability to come himself, having by an accident hurt his back. My servant, suspecting the truth of the old man’s story about his wife’s death, asked this person “How is the old man’s wife?”—when she, not being in the secret of the fraud, replied, “Quite hearty, thank you.”

It is unnecessary, Sir, to illustrate further this catalogue of vice; and, were I to touch upon the practices of the *begging-letter* impostors, they would alone occupy hours to delineate. It is generally admitted by all the best informed authorities, that both the classes I have adverted to, are ninety-nine out of a hundred, downright impostors, who would not accept the relief awarded to the destitute by law, and would not work, under any circumstances, if they could get work to do.

This, Sir, then is the body of persons I declare war against—that I hope you will lend me your aid to root out; and though, Sir, many might be disposed at first to question the probability of the numbers of Mendicants in London and its neighbourhood, which I compute, *at this time*, to reach to 50,000—as well as of the sum I assign to the result of their gains—yet, if the sources whence I have drawn my estimate be examined, the number, great as it undoubtedly is, will not be deemed far from approximating to the truth. I may just mention some few facts in corroboration of my statement.

In the year 1802, Mr. Martin, who, under the sanction of the Secretary of State, undertook an enquiry into the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis, estimated the number of beggars *then*, at *sixteen thousand*!

Mr. Mayne, one of the Police Commissioners, states the number of persons carried before the Metropolitan Magistrates, in the year 1837, to be *for begging, four thousand*; and *eighteen thousand* as the number of the annual commitments of persons *for vagrancy*.

The number of juvenile vagrants and beggars, under sixteen years of age, taken up for petty larcenies and offences, is annually between *three and four thousand*.

The number of begging-letter cases stated, in the report of the Mendicity Society, to have been investigated during the last three years, is nearly *seventeen thousand*.

The numbers who flock to the nightly asylums or refuges for the destitute, and who chiefly, if not entirely, consist of beggars and vagrants, are from *six to seven thousand*, and these are only of the most unsuccessful practitioners, not *one tenth*, perhaps, of their profession.

I will not weary you, Sir, with further proofs. I may, I think, safely state the number of beggars in and about London, at the present time, at 50,000, of which a large proportion *are Irish*; and, if we compute their earnings at *one shilling* per day, it would be 900,000*l.* a year; but it is shown, in numerous instances, to reach

six and seven shillings, and few, perhaps, gain less than two shillings per day. Hence, my estimate of the sum of 1,200,000*l.*, annually extracted from the pockets of the charitable, is under rather than over-rated. That the trade of the mendicant is a lucrative one is evidenced by the fact that foreigners enter the list as competitors with the native beggar; and even *Lascars* prefer to endure the severity of this climate, and to live by begging, than to return to their own country and live by honest industry.

This, Sir, then is the army of impostors I denounce—these are the practices I would put an end to—the trade I would destroy; and on three grounds.

Firstly—*Because it is opposed to all justice and natural law, that any number of able-bodied persons should be permanently maintained in idleness at the expense of the industrious portion of the community.* No one, Sir, will, I think, question this position. The Canon Law, our own Statute Law, declare it. Even in China, it is a maxim that, for every man and woman who are idle, two persons must suffer cold and hunger. If I may venture to adduce the authority of Scripture, we have the plain language of St. Paul—"For even, when we were with you, this we commanded, That if any would not work, neither should he eat." Labour is the law imposed upon mankind, from which none can be exempted, except to the detriment of the community. *By industry alone this great empire has reached its pre-eminent rank among the nations of the world.* If then, Sir, it is unjust that *any body* of men should be idle consumers, how much more flagrant an injustice is it to tolerate the idleness of the most degraded, vicious, and abandoned race which language can describe?

Secondly—*I protest against this vile crew of impostors as diverting the alms of the benevolent from the really deserving poor, from the alleviation of real distress and misery.* It is not, cannot be doubted, that in a population of 16,000,000, where *one* in every eleven souls is actually ascertained to be dependent on parish relief, or where 1,400,000 poor are found, that there is any lack of objects for commiseration. But, Sir, they are not the persons found importuning alms in the public streets.



It is admitted, on all hands, that the most deserving objects of real and deep distress are the last to court attention to their wants. They are not the clamorous nor obtrusive, but struggle on in silence in the dark and cheerless room of some wretched court or alley. I may boldly, but faithfully, declare it *as an axiom*, that no worthy people, however driven by the pressure of calamity and want, are found resorting to street-begging. How much better, then, for the humane, to make the Church their almoner. By no method can the benevolent intentions of the charitable be more certainly attained. Since no body of men is so well acquainted with the deserving poor and their wants as the parochial clergy, by making them their almoners, the double good is effected of administering judicious relief, sound charity, and strengthening at the same time the cause of religion.

If, instead of daily disbursing their pence to beggars in the street, which, even were it to real objects of charity could afford no permanent relief, the charitable would reflect what good might be effected by the judicious application of these daily twopenny accumulated into goodly sums, as they, at the end of six months, and the year, would be; that the *two or three pounds* might, and in repeated instances would, serve to rescue a whole family, of industrious habits, from impending ruin and the degradation of the union; if, Sir, I could only force such reflections upon their minds, how beneficial would be the results!

Fearfully great as the number of poor already is in this country, I dread, Sir, to contemplate the access of poverty which the financial difficulties of the present period will engender, by the inevitable stoppage of railway works, which have, by a most reckless disregard of all political wisdom by the Legislature, been suffered, nay, encouraged, to proceed with the most unhealthy rapidity; absorbing all disposable capital, giving a false stimulus to labour, whose cessation must suddenly throw thousands of able-bodied men upon parish relief. The number of men employed on railways is stated by Mr. Weale to be 300,000. There is, then, every reason to husband the resources of charity, which will be even yet more largely drawn upon without the aid of the beggar and the vagabond.

Thirdly—Sir, I DENOUNCE THE TOLERATION OF THIS HORDE OF

MENDICANTS AS A MATTER OF POLICE. The step from mendicancy to robbery and outrage, believe me, Sir, is but a brief one. They are indeed indissolubly connected. Report after report on the subject of crime and criminal law, which I have waded through, teems with proof of the near alliance between *mendicancy* and *crime*. I am not wrong in branding the mendicants as either thieves or the accomplices of thieves. Their sufferance is therefore maintaining a nursery for rogues: it is an unfailing reservoir to feed the various channels of crime: the streets are the "rogues' sanctuary." You thus augment the expense for Police, for Criminal Prosecution, and all the machinery of the administration of Criminal Law.

You prefer punishment, to prevention, convicts, to working poor, an expensive, demoralizing scheme of retribution, to a simple and effective hindrance of the offence; and, Sir, if I were to touch upon the *contaminating influence* which such a mass of abandoned wretches must, and inevitably do, exert over the minds and habits of the industriously disposed with whom they mix, I should, indeed, fatigue your patience: but it is too obvious to require exposition. The poorer, the humbler classes, wanting the benefit of intercourse with their more fortunate fellow men, the wealthy and the educated—having no bright example to imitate, are, as it were, delivered over to the baneful impressions which the picture but too powerfully presents of trafficking imposture thriving, where honest industry fails almost to live.

If your patience, Sir, is not exhausted, and you will bear with my prolixity, I should be glad to point out what I consider are the palpable causes of Mendicancy, and the remedies for its abolition. *Unquestionably the primary and sustaining cause of Mendicancy is the ill-judged benevolence of the charitably-disposed.* If none gave alms in the streets, no beggars could exist, or would be found. This indiscriminate distribution of pence is, then, the fruitful source of Mendicancy; and the non-enforcement of the law against beggars and vagrants which, by the supineness and want of vigilance of the authorities, is suffered to sleep. I have been given to understand that the late Government, through the Home Secretary, instructed the Magistrates to be lenient to beggars—in other words, to dismiss charges of Mendicancy, unless of flagrant character. The wisdom of this course I am at a loss to discover.

I can, indeed, scarcely believe in the truth of my information : but certainly the Police Magistrates neither deal with severity or uniformity in the cases which come before them, and do obviously lean to what, in my opinion, is a mistaken feeling of humanity. The law itself may not be quite so stringent as it should be, and by various artifices is evaded, such as by affecting to offer some valueless article for sale ; and the machinery for its effective application is far from perfect. The Police are, by their dress, recognized by the mendicant, and in their sight would not beg, *if the Police* were instructed to forthwith take them up. They, therefore, ply their calling in their absence, no difficult matter ; and, since they cannot interfere, unless eye witnesses of the fact, or some person will give the beggar in charge, which no one likes to do, both from the trouble and from the fear of being thought harsh and unfeeling, *Mendicancy* goes on unchecked. Now, Sir, as to the remedies I would offer.

*The primary and sustaining cause of Mendicancy being, as I have already stated, the ill-judged and indiscriminate alms-giving of the benevolent,* it is obvious that if we could prevent alms-giving—that, if no one gave, beggars could not subsist. If we could only persuade the charitable to abstain from indulging in their pernicious bounty—could only impress them with the truthful advice of Terence, “*Benefacta male collocata, malefacta existima*”—Mendicancy would shortly disappear. Colonel Rowan and Mr. Mayne, Commissioners of Police, in their evidence before a Committee of the House of Commons, went so far as to suggest that it might be beneficial to make it penal to give alms in the street, and stated, I think, that it actually was an offence in the penal code of Prussia. I am not disposed to adopt this advice, for I think it would be repugnant to English feeling, and would wear the aspect of a harsh interference on the part of the Legislature, and would, in the present state of public opinion, be highly unpopular. But I would rather, Sir, first put in force the existing law, which, if uniformly carried out, would, with a vigilant and well instructed Police, very soon diminish the numbers of metropolitan beggars.

I think it would be very advisable also, as an auxiliary measure, that the Parochial Authorities should, under the powers of their

several Local Acts, appoint a few paid Constables, active and intelligent men, to act in concert with the Police. Such a power is given to this Parish, Sir, by the 35th Geo. III. c. 75, which, indeed, confers, not only the power of apprehending idle persons, beggars, &c., but invests you with the power of detaining them for fourteen days with hard labour, and, during that time, to have *male persons privately whipped*. I am aware that the feeling of the present age is strongly averse to flogging under any circumstances, as destructive of self-respect, which it is so desirable to maintain; and to this opinion I am inclined to give due weight. You may not feel disposed to put in force this portion of the law; yet I feel assured that it would, in some cases, especially of hardened juvenile delinquents (for the early age at which they begin makes them hardened while even young), be a salutary terror and check to the confirmation of their habits of Mendicancy, more so than any other punishment.

But further, Sir, as I have already noticed, the *Law is itself* imperfect. It is constantly evaded under the pretence of selling some valueless articles. It has been decided also that a man and his wife, women and children, walking in the middle of the streets singing, though obviously to excite alms-giving, does not come under the law. I am not prepared to say that such evasions can be remedied: it is touching on a very delicate subject, and requires great circumspection before advising any amendment of laws which restrain the liberties of even the meanest and most degraded in the land, lest they be perverted into an engine of oppression. I prefer here again to rely, for the present at least, on the existing law.

It is an encouraging fact that no vigorous effort to suppress Mendicancy has failed in its object. At one time MUNICH was so infested with daring mendicants, who set the Police at defiance, and extorted alms by their bold gestures and menaces, that it was found necessary to call in the aid of the military to suppress them: as many as 2,600 sturdy beggars were in one week dragooned into an abandonment of their trade, and now, not a beggar is to be seen. During a year that I resided at VIENNA I do not remember being once accosted by a beggar; nor do I remember

seeing any at DRESDEN, though the people are wretchedly poor. PARIS abounds with misery enough, but its Police is too vigilant, and its law too stringent, to admit of hordes of beggars plying their vocation in its streets.

In conclusion, Sir, let me observe that the toleration of Mendicancy in this Metropolis and the large towns of England, in addition to the numerous other evil consequences which I have attempted to point out, brings the most undeserved disgrace upon our national character. It leads to the formation of the most erroneous impressions on the minds of foreigners visiting this country respecting the humanity of the English: they behold a Capital unrivalled for its commercial activity, for its evidences of wealth, and display of luxury; but, on the other hand, they meet with exhibitions of wretchedness and misery—of loathsome spectacles of apparently helpless indigence and uncared-for suffering, to an extent and in a degree which cannot fail to strike them with horror and disgust, and frequently to diminish their respect for the English character—beholding an amount of apparent misery not to be met with in any Capital of Europe, nor, indeed, in all the Capitals of Europe together. So far from crediting that more than five millions sterling are annually levied by law for the relief of the poor of this country, in addition to probably two millions yearly distributed by charitable institutions of every kind for the alleviation of sickness and disease, and of large sums distributed by private benevolence—so far, Sir, from supposing this to be the case, they would very naturally imagine that we abandon our unfortunate fellow countrymen to a precarious subsistence by begging in the streets—that we are dead to all charitable emotions, and careless of and indifferent to the miseries of the poor: and well might they think so; for it would be difficult to persuade them that the Government and Authorities would suffer the streets of the Capital to be enumbered with thousands, aye, tens of thousands, of men, women, and children, loud in their importunities, urgent in their appeals, if the law of the land made any adequate provision for their relief; and that there existed no necessity for begging as a means of existence. Much more, Sir, would they discredit the assertion that the crowds of mendicants who swarm in the Metropolis are nearly all undeserving, hardened vagrants—impostors of the most accomplished school, whose distress is a well-acted coun-

terfeit, and that this is known by the Government and the Police, and yet suffered to be practised—I repeat, Sir, that no foreigner would believe such an assertion, nor could we blame his ineredulity. Here Sir, then, is another ground, if one were wanting, for suppressing this abominable trade—for removing this evil, which brings discredit and reproach, most undeservedly, on the fair fame of England as a wise and charitable nation.

Thanking you, Sir, and gentlemen, for the patient attention with which you have so kindly listened to a speech which I regret has been of such length, I now beg to move the resolution which has been read to you by the Vestry-clerk, viz:—

“Whereas Mendicity in the Metropolis has reached an alarming height by reason of the non-enforcement and evasion of the laws against vagrants and beggars: and whereas its professional Mendicants may be estimated at no less than 50,000, who are for the most part thieves, or the accomplices of thieves: and whereas it is supposed that the sum of 1,200,000*l.* a-year is in this way wrung from the abused benevolence of the public to the maintenance in idleness of a class of trading impostors, who do not contribute a farthing’s-worth of labour to the common good: and whereas such sum of 1,200,000*l.* a-year is thus diverted from the proper objects of charity, the industrious poor: and whereas Mendicancy is known to be a fruitful source of all vice and crime, and in that way augments the expenditure for Police and Criminal Prosecutions; it is proposed that a deputation from this vestry be appointed to wait on her Majesty’s Secretary for the Home Department, for the purpose of soliciting him to give instructions to the Commissioners of Police and Stipendiary Magistrates to enforce the Laws for the suppression of Mendicancy in the Metropolis, and amend the same if necessary.”

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